ARC XLV:
THE PRINCESS OF HELL'S HIGHLANDS

HEY, EVERYONE! HELLO, JUST A SECOND!

YOO HOO! HEY YOU ON THE OTHER END OF THE SCREEN!

BEFORE THE STORY STARTS, I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU ALL AND SAY THAT THERE IS A SORT OF...LET'S SAY "GAG" TO THIS NEXT TALE.

I KNOW MANY OF YOU ARE CULTURED AND VERY BRIGHT AND WILL FIGURE THINGS OUT EARLY. I JUST ASK THAT YOU KEEP IT TO YOURSELF. THAT IS..."ASK" IN THE NICEST, MOST SINCERE AND, IN NO WAY, THREATENING MANNER POSSIBLE...

...OF COURSE

SO! WITH NO FURTHER DELAY, RETURN WITH ME BACK TO A SIMPLER TIME IN HELL'S DECORATED HISTORY.

I WELCOME YOU TO ENJOY "THE PRINCESS OF HELL'S HIGHLANDS".

PEOPLE OF HELL'S HIGHLANDS

THE LAW IS CLEAR!

PRINCESS BELLE WILL MARRY THE MAN WHO ANSWERS HER THREE RIDDLES. BUT IF HE IS UNABLE TO GUESS THEM CORRECTLY...

THEN HIS HEAD WILL ADORN THE PALACE YARDS

BECAUSE HIS ANSWERS DID NOT PLEASE THE PRINCESS, THE LAW SAYS THAT WHEN HELL'S SKY BLACKENS, PRINCE KALIAK OF HELL'S LOWLANDS WILL HAVE HIS HEAD CHOPPED OFF!

HE FAILED...

THEY ARE GOING TO CUT HIS HEAD OFF

SOMEONE WAKE THE AXE MAN...

STOP SHOVING! DON'T CROWD, YOU'RE GOING TO TRAMPLE HIM!

ARE YOU ALL SO DESPERATE TO SEE SOMEONE BEHEADED THAT YOU WOULD STAMPEDE OVER A BLIND OLD MAN?!

GIVE ME YOUR HAND, OLD MAN, I'LL LEAD YOU OUT OF THIS CROWD.

WAIT...! I DON'T BELIEVE IT!

STRANGER... YOUR VOICE...

I WAS TOLD YOU HAD COME THIS WAY!

FATHER! IT'S ME! YOUR SON!

MY SON, TA—

SHH, FATHER, DO NOT SPEAK MY NAME. THOSE THAT SACKED YOUR KINGDOM ARE STILL AFTER US AND HAVE EARS EVERYWHERE.

I HAD FEARED THAT YOU DIED WHEN THE PALACE WAS BURNED DOWN. THANK GOD YOU FOUND ME.

SON, WHEN ALL WAS LOST AND THEY HAD COME TO KILL ME, A SOFT VOICE SPOKE TO ME SAYING "COME WITH ME AND I WILL GUIDE YOU". IT WAS HEZZY.

IN MY DARKEST MOMENTS HEZZY DRIED MY TEARS, URGED ME ON, AND EVEN BEGGED FOR ME.

HEZZY... WHO ARE YOU?

JUST A SLAVE GIRL. NOTHING MORE, SIR, ONLY A SLAVE GIRL.

CERTAINLY MUCH MORE FROM MY FATHER'S TELLING, BUT WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE TO SHARE IN HIS ANGUISH?

JUST BECAUSE, AND YOU WOULDN'T REMEMBER, BACK IN THE PALACE, YOU SMILED AT ME...

SOMEWHERE, THE EXECUTIONER IS GRINDING HIS AXE...

NO ONE WILL EVER SOLVE THE RIDDLES AND WHEN THE KING DIES, THAT COLD-HEARTED PRINCESS WILL RULE...

DO YOU THINK KALIAK REGRETS TAKING ON THE PRINCESS' CHALLENGE?

REGRET? WHO ASKED OF REGRET? HOW CAN I REGRET THIS OUTCOME? YES I WALK TO MY DEATH, BUT I DIE FOR LOVE. WHO COULD WANT FOR A MORE NOBLE END?

POOR YOUNG FOOL. PRINCESS BELLE IS INCAPABLE OF RECIPROCATING LOVE.

EVERY YEAR, YOUNG MEN BY THE DOZENS, BLINDED BY LOVE, SOUND THE GONG ON THE HILL TO ANNOUNCE THEIR INTENTIONS TO THE PRINCESS.

THEN COME THE THREE RIDDLES... THREE ENIGMAS NONE CAN SOLVE.

THEN DEATH WILL FOLLOW.

DID YOU HEAR WHAT HE SAID ABOUT NOT HAVING ANY REGRETS? IF THE PRINCESS DIDN'T WANT HIM, WHY NOT SEND HIM AWAY?

WHO WOULD MURDER SOMEONE FOR THE CRIME OF BEING IN LOVE?

THE SKY IS TURNING BLACK. THE PRINCESS WILL BE COMING ONTO HER BALCONY TO WATCH THE EXECUTION

PRINCESS BELLE...

SHE'S BEAUTIFUL.

BE KIND, PRINCESS!

SPARE HIS LIFE!

PLEASE, PRINCESS! SPARE HIM!

SPARE HIM!

MOST DIVINE OF ALL BEAUTIES...

OH GLORIOUS WONDER...

SON, ARE YOU MAD?!

MY LORD, WE SHOULD LEAVE.

PRINCESS BELLE!

PRINCESS BELLE!!

PRINCESS BELLE!

PRINCESS BEL—

THAT PRINCE IS DEAD, ISN'T HE?

DO YOU SEE WHAT LOVING ONE WITH NO HEART BRINGS?

MY LORD, LET US LEAVE BEFORE SOMEONE THINKS YOU WERE SERIOUS!

No... I MUST STAY!

No! I CAN'T LOSE YOU AGAIN!

YOU WON'T, FATHER. MY PURPOSE IS NOW CLEAR AND THROUGH HER BEAUTY, I WILL TRIUMPH.

WHAT A LOAD OF INCOMPREHENSIBLE TRIPE!

YOU'D BETTER STOP AT ONCE!

PRINCESS BELLE IS MEANT ONLY FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO BE BUTCHERED!

HERE THEY CHOKE YOU AND CONFLAGRATE YOU

AND SPIKE YOU AND SKIN YOU!

AND SLICE YOU AND CHOP YOUR HEAD OFF!

PRINCESS BELLE'S MINISTERS, EH? WELL YOU CANNOT STOP ME. DON'T TRY TO HOLD ME BACK.

MADMAN, AWAY!

THE CEMETARIES ARE COMPLETELY OCCUPIED HERE

NO SHORTAGE OF HOMEGROWN LUNATICS.

WE'D NOT WANT ANY FOREIGN IMPORTS!

ITS NOT THAT WE CARE, ITS JUST THAT WE ARE THE ONES WHO WILL HAVE TO ARRANGE YOUR FUNERAL...

YOU'RE A YOUNG GUY. PLAY THE FIELD BEFORE COMMITTING TO CERTAIN DEATH.

HOW ABOUT THIS ONE? TELL HER THAT SHE ISN'T LOVELY! YOU CAN'T!

WHY SETTLE ON ONE GIRL? A MAN LIKE YOU COULD GET A HUNDRED! THINK OF IT, A HUNDRED GIRLS IN LOVE WITH YOU! YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS, RIGHT?

TWO HUNDRED SOFT BREASTS!

... WHERE ARE YOU GOING WITH THIS?

I MUST STAY. I HAVE TO PROVE TO THE PRINCESS THAT I AM WORTHY!

LOOK AT HIM, PING

LOOK AT HIM, PONG.

LOOK AT HIM, PANG.

CATASTROPHE!

QUITE DEMENTED!

HALLUCINATIONS!

I'M AFRAID HE CAN'T HEAR YOU.

NIGHTS WITHOUT A GLINT OF STARLIGHT OR CHIMNEYS SHUT OFF FROM DAYLIGHT ARE MORE LUCID THAN THE PRINCESS' RIDDLES.

BRONZE AND IRON, OR FLINT AND GRANITE—

—OR YOUR HEAD!

—ARE NOT HALF AS HARD AS WHAT SHE'LL ASK

SO GET LOST AND GOOD RIDDANCE TO YOU.

I'M ONLY GOING ONE PLACE, AND THAT IS UP THE HILL TO SOUND THE GONG!

YOU WILL KILL YOURSELF LIKE ALL THE IDIOTS WHO CAME BEFORE YOU!

I BEG YOU, MY LORD, HEAR ME...

MUCH MORE AND MY HEART WILL BREAK! HOW LONG I'VE WANDERED WITH YOUR FATHER AND THE MEMORY OF YOUR SMILE IS MY ONLY COMPANY.

BUT, IF, TOMORROW, YOU FAIL TO MAKE THIS HEARTLESS PRINCESS LOVE YOU AND YOU ARE KILLED...

YOUR FATHER AND I WILL LOSE THE WILL TO CONTINUE AND WE WILL DIE ON THE LONELY ROAD OF EXILE.

PLEASE DO NOT SAY SUCH THINGS, HEZZY. IF I SHOULD FAIL, BE STRONG FOR MY FATHER'S SAKE. BE GENTLE AS YOU ARE. IF TOMORROW YOU ARE BOTH ALONE, PLEASE DON'T LEAVE HIM. STAY WITH HIM, COME WHAT MAY.

MY SON, I COULDN'T BEAR TO LOSE YOU AGAIN...

TO LIVE IS SUCH A BLESSING

MAKE THE ROAD SWEETER FOR HIM BY YOUR KINDNESS

HOW CAN YOU IGNORE US?

TURN AWAY FROM THIS SORCERY!

TO LIVE IS SUCH A BLESSING!!

HAVE YOU NO THOUGHT OR LOVE FOR ME, MY SON? I CANNOT BE PARTED FROM YOU AGAIN.

I KNOW WHAT I ASK FROM YOU IS UNFAIR, BUT WHAT YOU ASK OF ME, TO TURN FROM THE WILL OF LOVE, IS EQUALLY UNFAIR.

TO LIVE IS SUCH A BLESSING!

GOT HIM!

LEAVE HOLD OF ME! I SEEK GREATER GLORY! IT WAITS AT THE GONG!

HER FACE YOU SEE IS AN ILLUSION! HER LIGHT IS FATAL!

TRY TO DRAG HIM OFF! TRY TO DRAG HIM OFF!

EVERY STRAND OF MY BEING, WITH ONE VOICE SCREAMS FOR PRINCESS BELLE!

PRINCESS BELLE!!

PRINCESS BELLE!!

PRINCESS BELLE!

DESTRUCTION!

GONG!

GONG!

GONG!

HAH HA HA HA HA

WE HAVE DUG A GRAVE FOR YOUR BODY AND CARVED A SPIKE FOR YOUR HEAD.

ALL FOR YOU WHO WOULD GIVE YOUR LIFE FOR LOVE!

II

BECAUSE THAT AWFUL GONG IS ROUSING UP THE TOWN BE READY FOR EVERY OUTCOME...

A WEDDING IF HE ANSWERS CORRECTLY, BUT IF HE LOSES, ANOTHER JOLLY FUNERAL.

WHY DON'T I DO THE WEDDING

AND I PLAN THE FUNERAL?

THE RED FESTIVE LANTERNS FOR A WEDDING

THE WHITE, SOMBER LANTERNS FOR A FUNERAL

A CANOPY OF SCARLET FOR THE BRIDEGROOM

AND FOR THE CORPSE, A FINE SPACIOUS COFFIN...

WITH PRIESTS WHO CAN SING WELL

AND EVERY OTHER DAMNED THING DEMANDED BY THE RITUAL...

ALL OF OUR CELEBRATIONS HAVE BECOME IDENTICAL AMUSEMENTS

THREE STRIKES OF THE GONG!

THEN THREE RIDDLES

THEN THE CHOPPING OF A HEAD.

SIX LOST THIS YEAR

EIGHT THE YEAR BEFORE THAT

PLUS THE ONE TONIGHT. HE MUST'NT BE FORGOTTEN.

RAPISTS AND SEDUCERS

CARNAL MALEFACTORS AND JEALOUS HUSBANDS

YES, HELL HAS NO SHORTAGE OF WILD AND CRAZY LOVERS TO FILL THE PRINCESS' UNENDING LUST FOR HEADS...

MMMMM

TEN TO ONE, THIS NEW BOY WON'T GET ONE RIDDLE RIGHT

I SAY HE ANSWERS THE FIRST ONLY. SOME OF THEM DO.

BOTH OF YOU. SO PESSIMISTIC

I SAY HE GETS THE FIRST TWO RIGHT AND THEN CHOICES ON THE THIRD.

THE TRUMPETS!

IS THE TRIAL STARTING ALREADY?

THIS NEW BOY SURE IS IN A HURRY TO HAVE HIS HEAD CHOPPED OFF

AGREED!

HELLOO, PING! HELLO, PONG! HELLO, PANG!

WRONG ORDER AGAIN, DILL HOLE.

`HEM! SUBJECTS OF THE COURT...

UNNAMED GUESTS

I PRESENT, THE KING OF HELL'S HIGHLANDS...

I AM THE PRISONER OF A GHASTLY PROMISE. I AM HONORBOUND TO KEEP IT. MY ROYAL THRONE GROWS FAR TOO BLOODY. PLEASE LEAVE WHILE YOU STILL CAN!

YOUR MAJESTY, I ASK TO TAKE THE TRIAL

CAN'T YOU JUST LEAVE ME BE WITHOUT ANOTHER CRUEL YOUNG DEATH WEIGHING DOWN ON MY ANCIENT CONSCIENCE?

YOUR MAJESTY, AGAIN I ASK TO TAKE THE TRIAL.

OH, STRANGER... YOU ARE DRUNK WITH DEATHWISH... BUT, SO BE IT.

BELLE, YOUR CHALLENGE HAS BEEN OFFERED AND ACCEPTED.

WITHIN ME, A STORY LIVES FOREVER. THE STORY OF A CRY OF ANGUISH THAT DARKENED AND FROZE MY INNERMOST SOUL

THE STORY OF MY GRANDMOTHER - PURE, SERENE, GENTLE - QUEEN LU-O. I WAS JUST A CHILD WHEN SHE DIED.

LOVED BY ALL HER SUBJECTS, SHE RULED WITH GRACE UNTIL CAME A MAN LIKE YOU. JUST LIKE YOU, OH STRANGER!

HOW COULD I FORGET THE SIGHT? WHEN THAT MAN'S LOVE WAS REFUSED AND MY GRANDMOTHER'S SWEET ENCHANTING VOICE WAS CRUELLY STIFLED!!

HERE IN HELL, WHERE GATHERS THE THRONGS OF THOSE WHO WOULD USE LOVE TO WICKED ENDS, I ACT OUT MY GRANDMOTHER'S REVENGE!

I WILL NOT STOP! NO NUMBER OF HEADS CAN BE ENOUGH TO SATISFY THE SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE THAT LIVES ON IN ME!

I FEAR, MY PRINCESS, THAT YOU MAY HAVE CARRIED OUT THIS VENGEANCE ON SEVERAL WHO WERE UNDESERVING OF IT.

FEAR INSTEAD THE THREE RIDDLES YOU CAN'T SOLVE AND THE DEATH THAT FOLLOWS!

NO, MY PRINCESS, THESE RIDDLES I WILL SOLVE. THEN LOVE WILL FOLLOW.

I HAVE SUFFERED BRAVE WORDS FROM THE MOUTHS OF FOOLS BEFORE!

THE TRIAL NOW BEGINS.

NOW LISTEN!

THROUGH THE SOMBER DARKNESS IT FLIES LIKE A GHOST, A LUMINOUS SHADOW, SOARING WITH WINGS EXTENDED OVER THE INFINITE SORROWS OF ALL PEOPLE

ALL THE WORLD INVOKES IT AND ALL THE WORLD IMPLORES IT

BUT THE GHOST ALWAYS FLIES AWAY AT SUNRISE. IT IS BORN WITHIN THE HEART, REBORN EVERY NIGHTFALL, BUT DEAD BY EVERY MORNING.

MY LOVELY PRINCESS, HOW COULD I NOT RECOGNIZE THAT WHICH YOU INSPIRE IN ME?

YOU SPEAK OF "HOPE"

IT IS HOPE

IT IS HOPE.

IT IS HOPE

YES. IT IS HOPE THAT WILL DELUDE YOU ALWAYS.

BLAZING JUST LIKE A FIRE, YET IT IS NOT FIRE!

SOMETIMES HOT AS A FEVER! A FEVER FIERCE AND REMORSELESS!

INERTIA SOON REDUCES IT TO LANGOUR!

THE MOMENT YOU LOSE YOUR LIFE, A MOMENT SOON TO COME,

IT FREEZES!

BUT DREAMS OF CONQUEST SET IT FLAMING.

IT CAN SPEAK WITH A VOICE THAT MAKES YOU TREMBLE.

ITS COLOR GLOWS LIKE THE SETTING OF THE SUN!

DO NOT GIVE UP NOW, STRANGER!

YES, ANSWER STRANGER!

ANSWER FOR LOVE'S SAKE!

PRINCESS, WHEN YOU GAZE UPON ME, BURNING YET RUNNING COLD WITHIN ME...

THE ANSWER IS "BLOOD".

IT IS BLOOD

IT IS BLOOD

IT IS BLOOD...

GUARDS! GIVE THAT WRETCH A BEATING!

HAVE COURAGE! YOU CAN SOLVE THE LAST RIDDLE!

IT IS LIKE A FREEZING ICE, BUT IT WILL BURN YOU WITH YOUR OWN FIRE!!

CLEAR TO SEE, YET SO GLOOMY

ITS CORE, DARK AS NIGHT!

ITS SHELL, THORNS WITH NO ROSE!

AND IF YOU LOSE IT, THIS CREATURE WILL TAKE ALL YOU HAVE!

YOU PAUSE. ANSWER, STRANGER! ANSWER NOW OR GIVE ME YOUR HEAD!

YES, MY PRINCESS, I PAUSE.

BUT NOT BECAUSE I HAVE FAILED YOUR CHALLENGE.

DIABOLICAL PRINCESS, NO WONDER YOUR COLLECTION OF HEADS IS SO VAST. A MAN COMPLETELY BLINDED BY LUST OR LOVE COULD NOT ANSWER.

I AM IN LOVE, BUT I AM NOT BLINDED. I CAN SEE YOUR RIDDLE THROUGH YOUR EYES. I PAUSE... BECAUSE WHAT I SEE PAINS ME!

HOW POORLY YOU SEE YOURSELF...

..."PRINCESS BELLE".

THE PRINCESS!

DID HE SAY THE PRINCESS?

YES, THE PRINCESS!

PRINCESS BELLE!!

GLORY TO THE VICTOR!!

PRAISE THE NEW HEIR TO THE EMPIRE!

NO...

EMPEROR! FATHER! DON'T GIVE YOUR DAUGHTER TO SOME STRANGER!

THE OATH YOU MADE IS SACRED.

NO! YOUR DAUGHTER IS SACRED!

YOU CAN'T JUST GIVE ME TO HIM! NOT LIKE SOME SLAVE GIRL!

DO NOT LOOK AT ME! I WON'T BE YOURS! NEVER!

THE OATH YOU MADE IS SACRED!

HE PLAYED YOUR GAME! HE PUT HIS LIFE IN DANGER!

IS THIS WHAT YOU WOULD PREFER? THAT I BE YOURS UNWILLING? UNLOVING?

NO, NO DEFIANT PRINCESS! I WANT YOU ALL ABLAZE WITH LOVE.

LOVE?! THE ONLY WAY I WOULD EVER LOVE YOU IS IF YOU FORCED ME TO.

AND SHOULD YOU TRY, YOU WOULD SOON BE SEARCHING FOR A NEW WIFE, BECAUSE I WOULD SOONER KILL MYSELF THAN BEAR YOUR CHILDREN!

OH BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS, HOW DO I PROVE MYSELF TO YOU?

TO SHOW THAT MY HEART IS TRUE AND MY INTENTIONS ARE PURE I WILL GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO TAKE MY HEAD WITHOUT BREAKING YOUR OATH...

YOU ASKED ME THREE RIDDLES AND I HAVE ANSWERED THEM CORRECTLY.

NOW I SHALL ASK YOU TO ANSWER ONLY ONE.

YOU MUST TELL ME MY NAME...

YOU DO NOT KNOW IT.

IF YOU CAN SAY IT BEFORE THE MORNING, YOU CAN HAVE MY LIFE AT DAWN.

I WILL PRAY TO HEAVEN THAT, WITH THE SUNRISE, I WILL CALL YOU MY SON.

PEOPLE OF HELL'S HIGHLANDS

PRINCESS BELLE COMMANDS THAT, TONIGHT, NONE SHALL BE PERMITTED TO SLEEP UNTIL THE STRANGER'S NAME IS KNOWN.

AND, SHOULD THE STRANGER'S NAME REMAIN UNKNOWN COME DAYLIGHT, THE ENTIRE CITY WILL BE PUT TO DEATH.

NONE WILL SLEEP NOW...

IN YOUR COLD ROOM, PRINCESS, YOU ARE AWARE AND RESTLESS. BUT PERHAPS, IF YOU GAZE OUT AT THE NIGHT'S SKY, IT WILL FILL YOU WITH LOVE AND YEARNING.

I WILL HOLD FAST THE SECRET OF MY NAME UNTIL THE MORNING WHEN WE WILL SHARE OUR FIRST KISS...

PLEASE, PLEASE... LET THE DARKNESS END SOON

HEY YOU!

STOP STARING AT THE SKY AND PAY ATTENTION

TELL ME! WHAT IS MISSING FROM YOUR LIFE THAT YOU THINK THE PRINCESS WILL FILL? WE CAN GIVE THAT TO YOU NOW IF YOU'LL JUST LEAVE!!

YOU LIKE PRETTY GIRLS? TAKE TWO, OR TWENTY FROM THE ROYAL HAREM!

THEY'RE GORGEOUS.

WITHOUT THEIR CLOTHES, THEY'RE EVEN BETTER!

IS MONEY WHAT YOU WANT? THE ENTIRE TREASURY IS YOURS FOR THE ASKING! JUST GO!

YOU HAVE NOTHING THAT I WANT.

WOULD YOU LIKE GLORY?

WE CAN ARRANGE IT FOR YOU!

JUST TELL US WHICH STRING OF STARS YOU WISH TO REPRESENT YOUR GREAT LEGACY!


ANYTHING YOU WANT! JUST GET LOST!
YOU DON'T KNOW THE PRINCESS LIKE WE DO. SHE'LL END US ALL FOR NOT DISCOVERING YOUR NAME!